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ABSTRACT

A longitudinal study was conducted to determine the extent to which the race of homicide suspects and victims influenced newspaper coverage of the crime and prosecution. Based on reader response, it was hypothesized that homicides involving members of minority groups would receive less newspaper coverage than those involving Whites. Coverage for 90 nonvehicular homicides and subsequent prosecutions in two Milwaukee, Wisconsin newspapers was reviewed, as were appropriate police and court records. Story length, thoroughness, and fairness were determined. Blacks and Hispanics were combined into a "minority" category for purposes of analysis. The results did indicate that race influenced how the newspapers covered homicides. However, it seemed to be the suspect's race, rather than the race of the victim that best predicted how the story was covered. All other things being equal, homicides allegedly committed by Blacks or Hispanics were likely to be covered less extensively than homicides allegedly committed by Whites. This finding does not prove that the Milwaukee newspapers downplayed minority homicide because they are racist or because they did not value the lives of Blacks and Hispanics. At least three plausible alternate explanations should be considered: (1) newspapers allocate space and staff effort to homicides in inverse proportion to the frequency of homicide among certain identifiable community subgroups, (2) newspapers are engaged in a benign effort to downplay news that reflects negatively on minorities, or (3) newspapers allocate more resources to stories they feel would be of greater interest to readers. (HTH)

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RACE, HOMICIDE, AND THE NEWS: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY

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RACE, HOMICIDE, AND THE NEWS: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY

The news media's coverage of crime and the effects of such coverage generally receive bad reviews from social scientists. The researchers have noted that the crimes which attract media attention are not representative of the actual mix of crime in society.[1] Accordingly, crime news may make people unduly fearful of being victimized by crime.[2] What's more, media reports of deviant behavior may cause some people to try to imitate it.[3]

Research also has found that routine coverage of crime carries a strong pro-police and pro-prosecution bias.[4] In addition, a defendant's chances of getting a fair trial may be prejudiced by crime news.[5]

Given the possibility that crime news may have such effects on its audience, it is important to examine the factors that influence how the news media cover crime.

Many of the studies alluded to above have shown that the seriousness of a crime, rather than how often similar crimes occur, is the strongest predictor of whether the news media will cover the crime; all other things being equal, a murder is more likely than a purse snatching to receive press coverage. But this does no more than remind us that traditional news criteria typically value relatively rare events (e.g. murder) more than relatively common ones (e.g. purse snatching).

Virtually no empirical work has examined the factors that determine which cases within a given category of crime attract press coverage. In other words, holding constant the seriousness of the crime, to what extent do attributes of a criminal case affect how the news media cover it?

This study adopts a longitudinal approach to answer a specific question: to what extent does the race of homicide suspects and victims influence how newspapers cover the killings and the ensuing prosecutions?

Such questions cannot be answered satisfactorally without the longitudinal approach -- tracking coverage of individual cases over time. In general, however, studies attempting to explain the extent to which crime news reflects the actual crime in society (or actual events in the criminal-justice system) have used aggregate statistics as indicators of real-world events against which news coverage can be compared.

The practice has clear limitations. One problem posed by aggregate data in such studies is that it is a difficult task for a content analyst to determine which crimes covered by the news organization occurred within the jurisdiction(s) of the law-enforcement agency or agencies that furnished the statistics. This is a vital step to take; without it, the researcher cannot be sure that he or she is comparing apples to apples.

A conceptually similar issue, but one that might be even more difficult to resolve, is how to determine that the cases about which the news organization published stories stemmed from crimes that occurred during the period covered by the aggregate crime statistics.

Crime statistics generally report activity in a given time period -- often the number of crimes, arrests or convictions in a calendar year. However, the time lag between a crime and an arrest, and between an arrest and the disposition of the case, varies widely. Criminal cases, especially serious ones, often drag on for more than a year; the criminal-justice process does not respect the beginning and end of the calendar year.

A researcher working only with aggregate crime statistics and news stories, in other words, would have difficulty figuring out whether the crime dealt with in a given news story occurred in the appropriate jurisdiction(s) and time periods.

The final problem with using aggregate crime statistics in studying crime news is that they offer no way to determine how the crimes covered by the news organization differ from those not covered. For example, aggregate data may

allow a researcher to determine what proportion of homicides a news organization covered, but there would be no way to determine from the data how the cases not covered differed from those that were covered.[6]

From the point of view of social theory, however, such questions can be rather interesting. For example, do newspapers cover crimes with minority suspects and/or victims differently from how they cover crimes with white suspects and/or victims? Aggregate data simply are not rich enough to enable researchers to answer such questions.

A search of the scholarly literature turned up no studies that examined news coverage of a sizeable number of individual criminal cases. Journalists in Chicago, New York, and Washington, D.C., however, have made rudimentary attempts to determine the effect of race on how homicides are covered.[7] In each case, they found that the newspapers in their cities were less likely to cover homicides with minority suspects and victims than homicides with white suspects and victims.

Some residents of Milwaukee, Wisconsin -- the community that is the focus of this study -- see evidence of a similar pattern in the Milwaukee Journal. One reader, in a letter to the editor about the Journal's extensive coverage of a tangled family dispute that ended in one white woman murdering another, asked: "I wonder if a black couple would have received this kind of treatment (in the Journal)?"[8] Another reader suggested that the Journal intentionally downplayed murder of blacks.

> Upon reading "Murder mysteries," I was totally disgusted and nauseated by writer Bill Nelson's calculated avoidance of mentioning any cases of unsolved murders of Wisconsin minority members. It would be difficult to believe that he was ignorant of these realities. I am forced to assume that he and the editor (who should have noticed the gaping omissions) deemed the murders of minorities, in particular black people, as unimportant.[9]

Although Journal editors deny that the race of a suspect or victim influences how the newspaper chooses to cover individual homicides,[10] the comments of the readers and the evidence from Chicago, New York and Washington suggest that

journalists who deal with police and court news may have a tendency to think in terms of "quality" murders and "cheap" murders.

"Quality" murders are those that have a chance of getting heavy news coverage because of the prominence of the people involved, because of unusually interesting circumstances surrounding the incident, or because -- according to the critics -- the suspect and/or the victim are white.[11]

"Cheap" murders, on the other hand, are those that have little perceived news value. If the critics are right, homicides with minority suspects and victims will tend to have relatively lower perceived news value, everything else being equal, and thus will get less coverage. The implicit notion underlying the critics' cheap-murder hypothesis is that mainstream news organizations place a lower value on the lives of minority homicide victims than on the lives of white homicide victims.[12]

Specifically, then, the central hypothesis of this study is that homicides involving members of minority groups will receive less newspaper coverage than homicides involving whites.

Method

This study examines newspaper coverage of 90 homicide prosecutions in Milwaukee County, which in 1980 had a population of 964,988. Every prosecution for non-vehicular homicide initiated between January 1, 1981, and June 30, 1982 (and completed by May 31, 1983) is included in the study. Homicides in which no suspect was arrested are not included.

All available police and court records on each case were reviewed. The entire coverage of each case in the morning Milwaukee Sentinel (circulation 180,762) and the afternoon Journal (circulation 307,112) -- a total of 744 stories -- was read and coded at the Journal/Sentinel library.[13]

Information about each defendant's race, sex and age at the time of the alleged homicide was taken directly from arrest records and cross-checked with

court records. Information about the race, sex and age of the victims was gathered from autopsy reports, other documents in court files, or news coverage.

News coverage was measured three ways: average length of stories about a case in each paper; how fair each paper's coverage was; and how thorough each paper's coverage was.

Average story length was computed by dividing the total number of paragraphs of coverage of a case by the total number of news items about the case. Average story length, rather than total number of stories or paragraphs, was used because average story length in theory is not a function of how long a case lingers in the felony-disposition process. The total number of stories a newspaper devotes to a case, for example, easily could be more a function of how many pre-trial hearings take place than of how interested the paper is in the case.

Number of paragraphs, rather than number of column inches, was used as the measure of story length because varying column widths in both Milwaukee papers made computation of standardized column inches difficult. Standardized column inches and number of paragraphs are highly correlated, however.[14]

Second, a measure of the fairness of the coverage was constructed. Previous work has shown that events which mark a suspect's entry into the criminal justice system are much more likely to be reported in the press than events that represent a suspect's exit from the system.[15] In other words, the arrest and/or filing of a criminal charge is much more likely to be reported than dismissal of charges, guilty plea, or trial verdict.

Coverage of this sort is not only incomplete, but also violates a common-sense notion of fairness. If a newspaper tells its readers that a person has been accused of committing a crime, the paper should also tell the readers how the case turned out. This is especially important to the suspect if he or she is cleared.[16]

"Unfair" coverage, then, was defined here as coverage that contains a story about an arrest or charge, but no story about the disposition of the case, i.e.

whether the suspect was found innocent or guilty. "Fair" coverage was defined as all other coverage, including the handful of instances in which the newspapers totally ignored a case.

The final newspaper-coverage concept is thoroughness. Coverage that includes stories about a suspect's entry into the criminal-justice system and his or her departure from it was considered "thorough." Other coverage was defined as incomplete.

Table 1 shows how the "fairness" and "thoroughness" concepts differ.

--Insert Table 1 about here--

During the period under study here, the Milwaukee newspapers treated homicides with black suspects and homicides with Hispanic suspects similarly. For each group, differences in average story length and in proportion of cases covered fairly and thoroughly were small. Accordingly, blacks and Hispanics were combined into a "minority" category for purposes of analysis.

Multiple regression techniques were used to estimate the effect of race on average story length. Because the fairness and thoroughness variables were categorical, discriminant analysis was used to determine how well the racial variables predicted whether cases would be covered fairly and thoroughly.[17]

Variables other than race might also be expected to influence how newspapers cover homicides. Holding constant the effect of such variables guards against the possibility that a third factor is the true cause of any statistical association between race and homicide coverage. Control variables in this study included several that measured the severity of the homicide (e.g. how many victims were killed in the incident, how many defendants were alleged to have been involved, and whether the initial charge against the defendant was first-degree murder or a less-serious homicide charge such as manslaughter); one that touched on the randomness of the killing (whether the victim knew the defendent); a rough

measure of the defendant's prior record (whether the defendant was released on bail[18]); and the sex of the defendant and of the victim.

Results

The results of the analysis provide fairly strong support for the hypothesis that race influenced how the Milwaukee newspapers -- especially the Milwaukee Journal -- covered homicides. Contrary to the "cheap murder" notion, however, it seemed to be the suspect's race, rather than the race of the victim, that best predicted how a homicide would be covered.

With respect to the Journal, the suspect's race was a significant predictor not only of how long the typical story about a homicide would be but also of whether the paper's coverage would be thorough. The race of the suspect was the strongest predictor of whether the Journal's coverage would be fair, although the relationship was only marginally significant ($p=.09$).[19]

The suspect's race also was a significant predictor of how long the Sentinel's typical story about a homicide would be, but the race of the suspect was unrelated to the fairness and thoroughness of the Sentinel's coverage.

As Table 2 shows, the strongest predictors of average story length about homicide in both Milwaukee papers were the suspect's race (stories about homicides with minority suspects tended to be shorter) and the randomness of the crime (stories about homicides in which the victim didn't know the suspect tended to be longer).

--Insert Table 2 about here--

No other variables were significant predictors of the Journal's average story length. With the Sentinel, however, the defendant's prior record and the initial charge also were related to average story length. Longer stories were associated with defendants who had little or no prior record and with initial charges of first-degree murder.

A multiple regression equation containing these variables accounted for 29.3 percent of the variance in the average length of the Sentinel's stories about different homicides. For the Journal, 18.8 percent of the variance in average story length was accounted for.

For both papers, the variables discriminated only weakly between the "fair" and "unfair" groups, possibly because the proportion of cases covered unfairly by each paper was relatively small. The Sentinel covered 83.3 percent of the homicide cases fairly; the Journal, 77.8 percent.

--Insert Table 3 about here--

As Table 3 shows, the only variable that significantly predicted Sentinel fairness was the number of defendants accused of a homicide: the more defendants, the more likely the Sentinel was to cover the case fairly. But the amount of variance in fairness accounted for by the analysis is only 5 percent.

None of the variables was significantly related to whether the Journal covered cases fairly. The suspect's race was the strongest predictor, but failed to achieve the .05 level of significance necessary to enter the discriminant function.

The strongest predictor of "thoroughness" was the initial charge against the homicide defendant, as Table 4 shows. In both newspapers, cases in which defendants faced first-degree murder charges were more likely to be covered thoroughly than were cases in which defendants were charged with lesser homicides, such as manslaughter.

--Insert Table 4 about here--

The papers differed on other factors that predict thoroughness, however. With the Sentinel, the number of defendants and the suspect's sex significantly added to the discriminating power of the function. The more defendants, the more likely that the Sentinel's coverage would be thorough; in addition, cases with

female defendants were more likely to be covered thoroughly by the morning paper. The discriminant function including these variables accounted for 18.9 percent of the variance in thoroughness in the Sentinel's coverage.

In the Journal, the only variable that significantly added to the discriminating power of the initial-charge variable was the suspect's race. Minority suspects' cases were less likely than white suspects' cases to be covered thoroughly in the Journal. The discriminant function accounted for 20.5 percent of the variance in the Journal's thoroughness.

Discussion

The main finding of this study is that the race of a homicide suspect in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, made a difference in how the city's newspapers -- especially the Milwaukee Journal -- covered the case. All other things being equal, homicides allegedly committed by blacks or Hispanics were likely to be covered less extensively than homicides allegedly committed by whites.

By itself, however, this finding does not prove that the Milwaukee newspapers downplayed minority homicide because they were racist or because they did not value the lives of blacks and Hispanics. At least three plausible alternate explanations exist; they merit careful consideration.

The first alternate explanation is that newspapers allocate space and staff effort to homicides in inverse proportion to the frequency of homicide among certain identifiable community sub-populations. An argument could be made that this is a racially neutral decision rule for journalists to use. Moreover, it is consistent with traditional news criteria, which value less frequent occurrences at the expense of more frequent ones.

At first glance, the distribution of homicides in Milwaukee County during the period under study seems to support this alternate explanation. Although less than one-fifth of the county's citizens are members of minority groups (18.3 percent), more than three times as many minority-group members as whites were arrested for

homicide during the period under study (68 of the 90 defendants were either black or Hispanic). That means members of minority groups were almost 14 times as likely as whites to be arrested for homicide.

In other words, because minority homicide is relatively more frequent, it merits relatively less space in the newspaper. Or so the argument goes.

If relative frequency (rather than the race of the suspect) is the real reason for differential coverage of homicides, however, relative frequency also should explain differences in coverage for splits of the population other than white/minority. But in at least one such breakdown, the relative-frequency rationale does not hold.

Seven of the 90 homicide defendants in this study were women, which means that a man in Milwaukee County was almost 12 times as likely as a woman to be arrested for homicide. According to the relative-frequency argument, then, homicides allegedly committed by women should be covered more extensively than homicides allegedly committed by men.

However, neither the sex of the suspect nor the sex of the victim was a significant predictor of average story length or fairness of coverage. The suspect's sex did show up as the third-strongest predictor of whether the Sentinel's coverage would be thorough -- cases with female suspects were more likely to be covered thoroughly -- but it was not a significant predictor of Journal thoroughness.

The weakness of gender as a predictor of newspaper coverage clearly militates against relative frequency as the true explanation for differences in how white and minority homicides were covered.

A second plausible explanation for the differences in coverage on the basis of the suspect's race could be that the Milwaukee newspapers are engaged in a benign effort to downplay news of minority homicide. The papers would be doing this, it might be argued, not because homicides are unimportant to the minority community or because the newspapers don't value the lives of minority victims,

but rather because the papers would prefer to avoid news that reflects negatively on minorities. The newspapers, in short, don't want to reinforce existing racism in Milwaukee by covering minority homicides extensively.[20]

Such an explanation for the differences in coverage, while not racially neutral, at least would be intended to reduce the level of existing racism in the community. If the explanation is the correct one, the newspapers would be expected to treat cases with minority defendants at least as fairly as cases involving white defendants. However, the results of this study's analysis suggest otherwise, though the evidence is not totally conclusive.

In the Journal, 90.9 percent of the cases with white defendants were covered fairly, compared with 73.5 percent of the cases with minority defendants. That difference is statistically significant at the .05 level. When all the variables in the analysis are taken into the account, the level of significant slips to .09. But race remains the strongest predictor of whether the Journal will cover a case fairly, with minority suspects' cases less likely to receive fair coverage.

The suspect's race makes no difference in whether the Sentinel covers a homicide fairly.

With the Journal, then, it is fairly clear that there is no benign effort to downplay homicides allegedly committed by minorities. The results of the analysis with respect to fairness are in the opposite direction from what would be expected if the Journal were engaged in such an exercise.

The evidence sheds little light on whether the Sentinel's staff may be undertaking to downplay news of minority homicide for noble reasons.

The third plausible explanation for the differences in coverage by the race of the suspect is that the Milwaukee newspapers simply allocated more resources to homicides they thought would interest their readers.

Although the Sentinel and the Journal do not publicly break down their circulation figures by race, it is clear that blacks and Hispanics nationally are less

likely than whites to read newspapers.[21] If that pattern holds in Milwaukee, the editors of the Milwaukee papers may have assumed, consciously or unconsciously, that their largely white readership would be more interested in news about white homicide than in news about minority homicide.

If this explanation is the real reason for differences in homicide coverage by race, however, the differences would be expected to be larger in the paper blacks and Hispanics were less likely to read.

The Audit Bureau of Circulations gives circulation figures by ZIP codes. In virtually all areas of Milwaukee County, the Journal outsells the Sentinel by a ratio of roughly two to one. In the ZIP code areas whose boundaries approximate Milwaukee's black community however, the Journal outsells the Sentinel by a five to one margin.[22] Accordingly, the differences in homicide coverage by race would be expected to be greater in the Sentinel than in the Journal, which has a higher proportion of black readers.

But the opposite was true, as Tables 2, 3 and 4 showed. Across the board, the race of the suspect was a more important predictor of average story length, fairness, and thoroughness in the Journal than in the Sentinel

As the foregoing discussion makes clear, then, three plausible non-racist explanations for differential coverage of homicide by race do not withstand close scrutiny. Although that does not prove that either or both of the Milwaukee papers are consciously racist in their coverage of homicide, that explanation is consistent with this study's findings.

It is important to note, however, that the critics are wrong when they contend that the race of the victim is an important factor in determining how a homicide will be covered. This study's results showed that the race of the suspect was a far better predictor of coverage than the race of the victim.

In other words, the "cheap murder" concept may need some revision. The Milwaukee newspapers apparently did not consider the lives of minority homicide

victims to be any cheaper than the lives of white homicide victims. Rather, it was the fate of minority homicide defendants as they traveled through the criminal-justice system that was under-valued by the papers.

Given the way newspapers report crime, that makes sense. The race of a homicide victim is central in the reporter's mind only until a suspect is arrested. After the arrest, the suspect and what happens to him or her in the courts becomes the focus for the bulk of the news coverage. The victim's fate is sealed; the outcome for the defendant is still in doubt.

Either way, however, the results of this study are consistent with previous research into the news media's coverage of crime: basically, the news media could do a more even-handed job.

That said, it is important to realize the limitations of this study. First and foremost, this study analyzed newspaper content. It offers no conclusions about the journalistic behavior that produces such content. The important next step to take, accordingly, is to examine journalists' practices to determine how a defendant's race becomes a piece of information that is important in deciding how a case gets covered. Researchers need to get into newsrooms and to follow police and court reporters on their beats to learn the answer to this question.

Second, the question of why a suspect's race has more influence on some newspapers' coverage (e.g. the Journal's) than on others' needs to be addressed. No explanation is readily apparent for why the differences in coverage by race were larger in the Journal than in the Sentinel. Granted, no complaints about racial bias in the Sentinel's coverage of crime were found in the course of this study, but then the only source consulted for such complaints were the Milwaukee newspapers themselves.

The Journal published many letters to the editor critical of its crime coverage; the paper's reader contact editor often addressed the issue in his weekly column. The lack of similar content in the Sentinel may mean that the

Sentinel received no criticism or that it chose to exclude critical letters and comments from its pages. Obtaining access to deliberations among editors would be helpful in resolving the open issue of how newspapers process criticism.

Third, it is conceivable that race is not at issue in crime coverage at all. The bias in coverage may operate on the basis of socio-economic status, for which race is probably a good surrogate in many communities, including Milwaukee. Unfortunately, data about defendants' socio-economic statuses generally was not available in the court documents and newspaper clippings examined for this study. Of course, such information generally is not available to reporters either, which reduces the likelihood that socio-economic status is the factor that causes the differential coverage in homicide.

Fourth, this study looks only at newspaper coverage of crime. A similar study focusing on the factors that influence which homicides the broadcast media cover would be an important next step.

Finally, this study focused only on homicides, and then only on cases in which a suspect had been arrested. Such cases clearly are not a representative sample of all crime covered by the news media, nor is Milwaukee necessarily typical of American cities. Research focusing on other crimes in other communities would help determine whether the effect found here is widespread.

NOTES

1. For example, James F. Davis, "Crime News in Colorado Newspapers," American Journal of Sociology 57:325-330 (1952); Bob Roshier, "The Selection of Crime News by the Press," in Stanley Cohen and Jock Young, eds., The Manufacture of News (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1973); Shari Cohen, "A Comparison of Crime Coverage in Detroit and Atlanta Newspapers," Journalism Quarterly 52: 726-730 (1975); E. Terrence Jones, "The Press as Metropolitan Monitor," Public Opinion Quarterly 40:239-244 (1976); George E. Antunes and Patricia A. Hurley, "The Representation of Criminal Events in Houston's Two Daily Newspapers," Journalism Quarterly 54:756-760 (1977); Sanford Sherizen, "Social Creation of Crime News: All the News Fitted to Print," in Charles Winick, ed., Deviance and Mass Media (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1978); Doris Graber, Crime News and the Public (New York: Praeger, 1980).

2. Walter B. Jaehnig, David H. Weaver, and Frederick Fico, "Reporting Crime and Fearing Crime in Three Communities," Journal of Communication 31:88-96 (Winter, 1981); Wesley G. Skogan and Michael G. Maxfield, Coping with Crime: Individual and Neighborhood Reactions (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1981), pp. 176-182; Mary Holland Baker, Barbara C. Nienstedt, Ronald S. Everett, and Richard McCleary, "The Impact of a Crime Wave: Perceptions, Fear, and Confidence in the Police," Law & Society Review 17:319-335 (1983); Linda Heath, "The Impact of Newspaper Crime Reports on Fear of Crime: A Multi-methodological Investigation," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (in press).

3. David E. Payne and Kaye Price Payne, "Newspapers and Crime in Detroit," Journalism Quarterly 47:233-238 (1970); David P. Phillips, "Airplane Accidents, Murder, and the Mass Media: Towards a Theory of Imitation and Suggestion," Social Forces 58:1001-1024 (1980). Other research, however, has failed to document imitative effects. See, for example, David E. Payne, "Newspapers and Crime: What Happens During Strike Periods," Journalism Quarterly 51:607-612 (1974); and David R. King, "The Brutalization Effect: Execution Publicity and the Incidence of Homicide in South Carolina," Social Forces 57:683-687 (1978).

4. Robert Drechsel, Kermit Netteburg, and Bisi Aborisade, "Community Size and Newspaper Reporting of Local Courts," Journalism Quarterly 57:71-78 (1980); Cohen, op. cit.; Sherizen, op. cit.

5. Mary Dee Tans and Steven H. Chaffee, "Pretrial Publicity and Juror Prejudice," Journalism Quarterly 43:647-654 (1966); Sam G. Riley, Pretrial Publicity: A Field Study," Journalism Quarterly 50:17-23 (1973).

6. Harvard criminologist James Q. Wilson is among those who argue against dependence on aggregate data. "Whenever we try to discover a relationship between hard-to-measure factors that operate deep inside a complex social structure, . . . we are particularly well advised not to rely on statistical studies using aggregate data," he writes. "We should attack the problem from a number of angles, using different kinds of data and various methodologies. Above all, we should look at what happens to individuals (rather than to cities or states)." Wilson, Thinking About Crime (New York: Basic Books, 1983), p. 127.

7. Phil Blake, "Race, Homicide, and the News," The Nation, December 7, 1974, p. 592 (Chicago); Clinton Cox, "Meanwhile in Bedford-Stuyvesant...: Why Whites Die on Page One," Civil Rights Digest 9:39-44 (1977); Mitchell Stephens, "Crime Doesn't Pay (Except on the Newsstands)," Washington Journalism Review 3:39-43 (December 1981).

8. Mike Estep, letter to the editor, Milwaukee Journal, September 12, 1981.

9. Beverly Griffin, letter, Milwaukee Journal Insight magazine, September 25, 1983.

10. See comments of Metropolitan Editor James Cattey in Russell Austin, "Did our coverage inflame Lacy case?" Milwaukee Journal, August 23, 1981.

11. Stephens, op. cit., p. 41.

12. An example may help illustrate the concept of "cheap" murder. As a cub reporter in Chicago in the early 1960s, Seymour Hersh, who later won a Pulitzer Prize for exposing the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, stumbled onto what he thought was a big story. A man in a black neighborhood had murdered five people and then killed himself. Hersh phoned a bulletin into the newsroom. The deskman was not impressed. "Ah, my good Mr. Hersh," he said. "Could it be that these unfortunate victims are of the American Negro persuasion?" They were, and Hersh was told to "cheapen it up." The story ended up getting only a paragraph or two of space in the local papers. Leonard Downie Jr., The New Muckrakers (Washington: New Republic Books, 1976), p. 58. See also William L. Dulaney, "Identification by Race in Newspaper Crime Stories," Journalism Quarterly 46:603-605 (1969); Blake, op. cit.: Alex P. Dobish, "Grady begins serving 7-year term," Milwaukee Journal, January 30, 1980; and Stephens, op. cit.

13. Circulation figures are taken from Editor and Publisher, 1983 Yearbook (New York: Editor and Publisher Co., 1983), p. 348.

14. Richard W. Budd, "Attention Score: A Device for Measuring News 'Play,'" Journalism Quarterly 41:259-262 (1964).

15. Sherizen, op. cit., p. 216; Graber, op. cit., pp. 45-47.

16. Fontaine Walker of Milwaukee stood trial for a murder he did not commit (another man was later convicted of the crime). After Walker's acquittal, his lawyer lamented the fact that the newspapers carried no story about the verdict. "It was just an unemployed black man charged with killing another unemployed black man," lawyer David Allen Hansher said. "When Fontaine was found not guilty, there wasn't even a story in the paper." William Janz, "Verdict was news only to man acquitted," Milwaukee Sentinel, April 6, 1982. Los Angeles Times media critic David Shaw has identified this kind of "unfairness" as one of the main failings of the press' coverage of the criminal-justice system. Shaw, Press Watch: A Provocative Look at How Newspapers Report the News (New York: Macmillan, 1984), p. 115.

17. A stepwise method was used. Stepwise selection begins with the best predictor variable, which then is combined with each of the other independent variables to find the pair that best distinguishes between the groups. These two variables then are combined with each of the remaining variables to identify the triplet that best distinguishes between the groups. The process continues until all variables are included or until additional variables do not significantly improve the discriminating ability of the function. Norman H. Nie, C. Hadlai Hull, Jean G. Jenkins, Karin Steinbrenner, and Dale H. Bent, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, second ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), pp. 446-448.

18. Direct information about defendants' prior records in most cases was impossible to obtain. Whether a homicide suspect is released on bail, however, is generally a good indicator of his or her prior record. Rare is the judge who would knowingly set bail low enough for a homicide suspect with an extensive prior record to be released from jail before disposition of the case. Defendants with no prior record, on the other hand, often get bailed out of jail pending the outcomes of their cases. The link between bail and prior record is strong enough that at least one prior study used whether a suspect was released on bail as a surrogate for prior record. See Thomas M. Uhlman and N. Darlene Walker, "'He Takes Some of My Time; I Take Some of His': An Analysis of Judicial Sentencing Patterns in Jury Cases," Law & Society Review 14:323-341 (1980).

19. Strictly speaking, the concept of statistical significance is valid only when the data being analyzed are random samples. This study's data are not random in the typical social-science sense, although an argument can be made that the homicide prosecutions in the time period under study were a random sample of Milwaukee homicide prosecutions over a longer period of time. Similarly, it could be argued that homicide prosecutions in Milwaukee during the period under study were a random sample of homicide prosecutions in the United States (or at least in large industrial communities). Neither argument is particularly convincing, however. All the same, this study reports significance levels because they are a convenient and widely understood aid in interpreting quantitative analyses.

20. A full discussion of whether members of minority communities would be helped or harmed by greater coverage of minority crime is beyond the scope of this paper. But one of the central functions of the news media is surveillance -- collecting and distributing information about what is happening in the environment of the audience. Presumably, members of minority groups have as much need as whites to know about homicides in their neighborhoods. Supporting this point of view is evidence that blacks are more likely than whites to read newspaper stories about crime and accidents. Carolyn A. Stroman and Lee B. Becker, "Racial Differences in Gratifications," Journalism Quarterly 55: 767-771 (1978). For a more ample discussion of the surveillance function of the press, see Harold D. Lasswell, "The Structure and Function of Communication in Society," in Lyman Bryson, ed., The Communication of Ideas (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), pp. 37-51.

21. Stroman and Becker, op. cit.

22. Audit Bureau of Circulations, "ABC Audit Report: The Milwaukee Journal/ Milwaukee Sentinel," July 1983, p. 43. The two ZIP code areas are 53205 and 53206.

TABLE 1 -- A Comparison of "Fairness" and "Thoroughness"

Does coverage include a story about suspect's exist from the criminal justice system?	Does coverage include a story about suspect's entrance into the criminal justice system? NO	Does coverage include a story about suspect's entrance into the criminal justice system? YES
NO	Fair Incomplete	Unfair Incomplete
YES	Fair Incomplete	Fair Thorough

TABLE 2 -- Predictors of Average Story Length

	Milwaukee Sentinel		Milwaukee Journal	
	zero-order correlation	beta	zero-order correlation	beta
Suspect's race[a]	-.376***	-.400***	-.390***	-.400***
Victim's race[a]	-.202	.138	-.300**	.036
Victim a stranger	.323**	.411***	.337**	.372**
Prior record	-.217*	-.228*	-.018	.075
Initial charge	.158	.289**	-.041	-.001
Number of cases	90		90	
Adjusted R-square	.293***		.188**	

***p<.001
**p<.01
*p<.05

[a]With racial variables, minority is coded as 0, white as 1.

TABLE 3 -- Discriminant Analysis: Unfair vs. Fair Coverage

Milwaukee Sentinel		Milwaukee Journal
Number of defendants	1.000[a]	None of the variables attained the .05 level of significance necessary to be included in the discriminant function.
Canonical correlation	.219	
Chi-square: 4.30, 1 df p=.038		
Proportion of variance accounted for	.050	

[a]Entries associated with variable labels are standardized discriminant function coefficients. The absolute value of these coefficients represents the relative contribution of the variable to the discriminating ability of the function.

TABLE 4 -- Discriminant Analysis: Incomplete vs. Thorough Coverage

Milwaukee Sentinel		Milwaukee Journal	
Initial charge	.832[a]	Initial charge	.859[a]
Number of defendants	.677	Suspect's race	-.703
Suspect's sex[b]	-.550		
Canonical correlation	.399	Canonical correlation	.413
Chi-square: 14.97, 3 df p=.0018		Chi-square: 16.24, 2 df p=.0003	
Proportion of variance accounted for	.189	Proportion of variance accounted for	.205

[a]Entries associated with variable labels are standardized discriminant function coefficients.

[b]Suspect's sex is coded as female=0, male=1.